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Gunsmoke: 127th ASB soldiers qualify on weapons, support Apache crews during training in Graf

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"I've got water in my underwear, water in my boots. This is real, genuine mud right here," said Spc. Nathan Faber of Company B, 127th Aviation Support Battalion, after crawling back and forth across the waterlogged terrain of a Grafenwöhr firing range to detonate a Claymore mine.

Gunfire rattled in the distance and mine blasts shattered the springtime serenity of the surrounding forest as soldiers of Hanau's 127th ASB went about the business of qualifying on an assortment of weapons during Gunsmoke 2002.

"On this range we knock out everything," said the 127th's Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Marler. "We just get up on all our qualifications."

In the course of about 10 days many of Marler's soldiers got to practice and qualify on everything from M-203 grenade launchers and M-249 Squad Automatic Weapons to hand grenades and Claymore mines at the Grafenwöhr Training Area. By March 6 over 350 soldiers had participated, he said. Battalion soldiers were bused down in batches to train and qualify, sometimes rotating in and out for just a few days at a time.

"They're very interested in firing different weapons systems," said 1st Sgt. Wayne Wright of Headquarters and Supply Company, 127th ASB, as soldiers prepared for Claymore mine exercises. "They get really good training out here. We'd like to do it more often, but it's not feasible because of the operations tempo."

"It's tough to pack the whole battalion up and come down here because we still have to support our other customers," said Marler. Working out of Hanau's Fliegerhorst Kaserne the 127th supports the 1-501st Aviation Attack Battalion and 2-501st Aviation Lift Battalion, the 1-1st Cavalry in Büdingen and the 69th Chemical Company on Hütten Kaserne.

Back on the firing range Faber cleaned the mud off his face after detonating his first live mine in almost three years. "There's no faking this. It's good stuff. I like getting out and getting dirty. You can always clean your stuff," he said. "I'm happy for him," said 1st Sgt. Bob Smith of Company B as Faber posed for a couple of photos with his pals. "We don't get to do it too often. They love it. It's a break from Fliegerhorst, a break from the normal routine. They want to stay out here. This is the only unit I've been in that they come out and dedicate a block of time to doing the crew-served weapons," said the 19-year veteran. "It's great attitude."

As the morning wore on soldiers crawled through the mud, two pairs at a time to place a mine, put in the explosive, crawl back to safety behind a berm and detonate the device. A closer look revealed that some soldiers wore a slightly different pattern of battle dress uniform - the German camouflage of the 127th's partnership unit, the Nachschubbataillon (Supply Battalion) 51 based in Schwalmstadt.

"We did this last year and we invited the Germans to come down and even had a soccer game in the rain with them," said Marler. Training at Grafenwöhr allows the 127th and their German partners to practice such battlefield skills as sling loading, combat Situational Training Exercises, firing exercises and mine training, and the two units participate in weeklong exchanges throughout the year, sending soldiers to train, work and live with each other, said Marler. The Nachschubbataillon soldiers were preparing to deploy to Kosovo as part of KFOR, he added.

"The Claymore mine training was fun," said Obergefreiter (Pfc.) Henry Gätz. "I've made new friends and it's been very interesting. The training here in Grafenwöhr is similar to what we do in my unit, but the U.S. Army has more equipment and possibilities. We have similar training and weapons, just no weapons such as mines or the Mark-19 40-mm cannon."

While the soldiers waited their turn or stood down after detonating their charges, Sgt. Carl Williams, the ammunition NCO on the range that morning, was busy keeping them supplied and going. "I run the ammunition for the battalion, Class V. I've got five ammo dogs. Three are brand new to the Army, and this is the most training they've got since they got in," said Williams.

"The troopers come together down here. You see all the little walls that may build up in garrison fall and they blend as a team," said Marler.

Despite the high spirits in evidence the mine exercise was more than just fun on the range. "With everything that's going on we need to be ready," said Sgt. 1st Class Gilberto Marquez of HSC, the range NCOIC.

Off to one side Pfc. Garrie Chumley and Spc. Monica Diaz of HSC were on call to respond in case of an emergency. "I'm here if anything were to happen to anybody and give first aid," said Chumley, who got to train on the M-249 SAW during his first tip to Grafenwöhr. "This is fine. I'm enjoying myself out here," he said. Diaz stood by to serve as an ambulance driver. In the event of a mishap it would take her 11 minutes and 29 seconds to transport an injured soldier to the dispensary or four minutes to the helicopter pad for medical evacuation, she said.

Marquez has never had to deal with that kind of situation. "No, thank God. We've never had to use them on the ranges I've run. That's why these two can do nothing but wait," he said.

"The safety management factor is built right in," said Marler. "Risk management is a part of our life in everything we do. That's always been part of aviation." Elsewhere around Grafenwöhr 127th soldiers teamed up with 1-501st Aviation Apache crews involved in gunnery qualification, providing supply and maintenance support. "We supply them with fuel and parts, just like our normal mission," said Marler.

Sgt. Kevin Green and Spc. John Fowler of HSC worked with Sgt. Reginald Harris and Sgt. Francisco Favela of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1-501st Aviation, at a forward arming and refueling point. "They land and the armament team here disarms it and then we refuel it," said Green.

"We'll be refueling the aircraft for gunnery. That's why they're here with us, to get that little extra training. It's just something a lot of us haven't done in a while," said Fowler.

"They come in here. We tell them what they need to know and train them so they'll be prepared if they ever go to an aviation unit. Especially now when we have to be more alert," said Favela.

Miles away in another area Sgt. Jason Daniel and fellow Company A soldiers finished a lunch break and went back to work on an M-230 30-mm Apache cannon.

"We've been ripping apart a gun and putting it back together," he said as he worked the firing mechanism.

"Here we get a lot more weapon system faults. We get some faults that we ordinarily don't get in the rear. It's because of gunnery. Mostly all we get to do on this site is maintenance," said Daniel, claiming he originally enlisted to work on machines such as the Apache. "I got exactly what I wanted."

"A lot of the weapons systems get tested out here," said Staff Sgt. Robert Dillard, surveying a dozen Apaches lined up for maintenance on a grassy swath.

"Some of the seals are dry rotted so they blow out. Some of the electronic systems are shot. The first few days are a massive amount of work, things you don't plan for, but that's what we are - the armament and electronics repairers on this bird. It's quite a job. As long as they keep the parts rolling we can keep them flying," he said.

"They really push these guys to the limits of what they can do and beyond. They are definitely the unsung heroes out here," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 William Allison of Company A, 1-501st, as the 127th technicians worked on the guidance system of his Apache.

The 127th returned to Hanau in mid-March with all soldiers safe and accounted for and looking forward to their next Gunsmoke, said Marler.